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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SA/INS

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TAGS: PHUM PTER CE UNICEF LTTE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: TIGERS TRY TO DOWNPLAY, DENY CHARGES  
OF CHILD RECRUITMENT

REF: COLOMBO 324

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SUMMARY  
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1. (SBU) Over the past week the local media have given broad coverage to reports of the February 23 UN Security Council session on child soldiers, highlighting in particular the reported recommendation by the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict that the Council consider sanctions against offending parties. Locally the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which was said to have been specifically cited in the UN report, let the story pass without public comment. The Sri Lankan media, however, reported that the LTTE has written to the Special Representative in New York proposing to engage in "dialogue" with the UN--but not, apparently, with UNICEF, which already has an agreement with the Tigers to end the recruitment of child soldiers. Embassy would appreciate the views of the Department and USUN about whether the UN Security Council will seriously consider sanctions against the LTTE for failure to comply with its pre-existing commitment to stop recruiting child soldiers. End summary.

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INTERNATIONAL SPOTLIGHT ON TIGER RECRUITMENT OF KIDS  
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2. (U) Over the past week the local English, Sinhala and (to a much more limited degree) Tamil media have given broad coverage to the February 23 UN Security Council session on child soldiers. In particular, local media highlighted the unfavorable attention garnered by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in a report submitted to the Council by Olara Otunnu, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, as well as Otunnu's suggestion that the Council consider sanctions, including travel bans, against offending parties. According to local reports, the UN Security Council will consider a proposal from the UN Secretary General for "a monitoring and reporting mechanism" on the recruitment of child soldiers. In addition, the state-owned press reported on February 26 that a recent EU press release had specifically condemned the LTTE's practice of recruiting child soldiers.

3. (U) The LTTE did not respond locally to Otunnu's report or to news of the Security Council session, although the local press and the UN website reported that the Tigers sent Otunnu a letter stating "their readiness to enter into dialogue, using the framework of the monitoring and reporting mechanism." Coverage in the local Tamil-language media varied, according to the relative degree of ideological and/or geographic closeness to the Tigers. For example, TamilNet, the pro-LTTE website, and Uthayan, a pro-LTTE newspaper in Jaffna, did not allude to the Security Council session at all. Sudar Oli, a pro-LTTE Tamil vernacular newspaper, carried only a statement from staff at Eastern University in Batticaloa District repudiating the UN Special Representative's report and depicting the LTTE as the defender of Tamil orphans. (The Trincomalee District School Principals' Association issued a similar rebuttal.) On the other hand, independent Tamil daily Virakesari (with the largest circulation islandwide) and the government-owned Thinakaran published excerpts of Otunnu's report, while Thinakkural, another independent vernacular newspaper, quoted LTTE Jaffna District Political Wing Leader Ilampirithy's denial of the practice--but without specific reference to the report.

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UNICEF: NO MORE "MECHANISMS"  
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4. (SBU) Despite the Tigers' absence of public comment, colleagues in the diplomatic community in contact with the LTTE indicated to us that the negative scrutiny has the Tigers worried. An Embassy contact in Batticaloa has also reported to us that the LTTE has been making the rounds recently in the east warning religious activists not to publicize LTTE human rights violations, including child

recruitment, to INGOs and the international community. Ted Chaiban, UNICEF's ResRep in Sri Lanka, told the Ambassador that he believed the UN should reject the LTTE offer for dialogue related to an additional and as-yet unformed "monitoring and reporting mechanism," since such a mechanism is already provided for--and is routinely flouted by the LTTE--in the Action Plan for Children (Reftel).

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COMMENT AND ACTION REQUEST  
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15. (SBU) This unfavorable publicity comes at an unwelcome juncture for the LTTE--just as they are attempting to portray themselves to Tamils at home and abroad as the beneficent and humanitarian guardians of tsunami victims in the north and east. The Tigers have been hoping that their post-tsunami relief efforts would earn them much-desired respectability and legitimacy with the UN and other INGOs. In this context, Otunnu's report is like the proverbial skunk at the family reunion, and the Tigers' local silence on the issue is not surprising. The LTTE offer to engage the UN in New York in "dialogue" is a obvious diversionary tactic; there are plenty of opportunities for the Tigers to engage with UNICEF here in Sri Lanka by fulfilling their existing commitments under the Action Plan for Children. Action Request: Embassy would appreciate Department's and USUN's views on the likelihood of sanctions, reportedly suggested by the Special Representative in his report, being taken up by the UN Security Council.

LUNSTEAD